

Dove Field Preparation and Management in Louisiana

In late August, with the traditional Labor Day opening of dove season approaching, hunters begin thinking about finding a place to dove hunt. Hunters with access to harvested grain fields or hayfields have a ready-made dove field. Invariably, however, many hunters without access to farms or pastureland will contact the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and inquire about preparing a dove field on their hunting lease or other piece of property. Unfortunately, by this time it's too late. The time to begin planning a dove field is in the spring.



A wide array of crops and native vegetation can be used as a dove field. However, all successful dove fields have a few things in common. First of all they contain an abundance of seed. Doves are primarily seedeaters and consume very little insect matter or green forage. Grass seeds and grains are among the more important foods. Secondly, the seed must be readily available. Doves prefer to feed on the ground in light cover. They are not strong scratchers so they avoid areas with dense ground litter. Therefore, seed must be exposed or found among very light ground litter. Finally, the field must be located in an area traditionally used by doves. Occasionally a well-prepared field will receive little use by doves simply because it is located in the wrong area.

When discussing dove fields, it doesn't take long for the subject of baiting to come up. While this document is not intended to fully discuss the baiting issue and cover all possible scenarios there are some guidelines to remember that will keep you out of trouble. It is legal to grow a crop and then manipulate the crop to make the seeds which were grown on site more available to doves. It is not legal to add seed to the field or remove seed and bring it back later. The rules are somewhat different for waterfowl so don't apply these guidelines to ducks and geese. Contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for information regarding the regulations pertaining to baiting.

Most dove hunters hunt the opening weekend and then are through for the year. However, if you've gone to the trouble and expense of developing a dove field, it makes sense to get as much hunting opportunity out of it as possible. The first split of Louisiana's dove season usually occurs the Saturday of Labor Day weekend. During this split we are hunting local birds, that is birds that hatched or spent the summer nesting in Louisiana. During the later splits, the local birds have left Louisiana and we are hunting birds that migrate into Louisiana from the Midwestern states.

Planting Recommendations

There are numerous crops that can be established to attract doves to a field. However, no matter what you plant, proper field preparation after the seed is mature is critical. Remember, doves like to feed on clean ground and a heavy accumulation of litter will discourage them from

using your field.

Mowing, haying, disking, or burning will be necessary to expose the seed and create the clean ground that doves prefer. Haying or raking is probably the preferred method since it removes the dead material and leaves seed exposed on the ground. If you cannot hay or rake the field, try disking strips through it. If the vegetation is not too thick mowing alone will sometimes work. Often a controlled burn following mowing is necessary to remove the dead leaves and stalks. You may have to experiment to find out what works best in our situation.

Once the seed is mature, you can begin cutting a few strips through the field 3-4 weeks prior to the season. As the season approaches, continue cutting strips until most of the field is cut. Most of the field should be ready about 2 weeks prior to opening day. If the field is large enough, you may want to save some of the crop for later splits. Consider leaving areas of standing crops or vegetation to provide cover for hunters.

In most cases weeds are not a problem in dove fields. In fact, the weed seeds are often good dove food. However, after several years of planting the same field, weeds sometimes become too thick and compete with the crop or result in additional ground litter that detracts from the quality of the field. When this occurs, disk the field early in the year to encourage the growth of weeds. Once the weeds germinate, spray the field with a non-selective herbicide such as Round-Up. Check the herbicide label, but in most cases, you can then plant your crop shortly after the weeds die. You'll still have some weeds, but they should be less dense. It may be necessary to treat in this manner each year if weeds are a persistent problem.

The following are some common crops used in dove fields in Louisiana.

Browntop Millet

Browntop millet is one of the easiest plants to establish and manage. Browntop millet takes 60-90 days to mature, so you will need to take this into consideration when determining your planting time. Since most hunters want a field ready for the September season, fields should be planted by mid May - early June. If you want fields for the later splits you can adjust your planting dates accordingly. Browntop millet seed will persist on the seed head, so if necessary, you can plant all your fields at the same time, but delay cutting if you are managing the field for 2nd and 3rd split hunts.

Browntop should be planted on a well-disced seedbed at a rate of 10-15 lbs. per acre. This is a lighter seeding rate than frequently recommended, but at heavier rates it is more difficult to obtain the clean ground doves require. The seed should be covered lightly after planting. Fertilization should be done in accordance with a soil test.

Peredovic Sunflower

Sunflower is one of the best plants for attracting doves, but requires a little more effort to establish than some other crops. Weed control is important in growing of sunflowers. Herbicides can be used to control weeds as can soil cultivation. However, if these are not

practical, you can broadcast plant sunflowers at a high rate to that the sunflower plants will shade out most weeds.

Sunflower takes about 100 days to mature, so if you want to hunt the 1st split, planting in April is necessary. Sunflower can be drilled at a rate of 10-15 lbs. per acre or broadcast at a rate of 30-40 lbs. per acre. Once the seed heads are mature, mowing, disking, and/or raking will be necessary.

You may want to think twice before planting sunflower in an area where deer depredation may be a problem. This is especially true for small fields, since a few deer can wipe out your crop in a short period of time.

Wheat

Wheat is often overlooked, but can be a good crop for a dove field. However, since wheat is planted in the fall, the crop needs to be established the year before in order to have good dove hunting. Wheat should be planted in late September - mid October. Broadcast 90-120 lbs. per acre over a well-disced seedbed and cover lightly. In many areas deer will graze the wheat through the winter, but grazing will usually end in the spring. The wheat will grow through the spring and mature in early summer. Mow, burn, or disk the standing wheat prior to the dove season to expose the seed. Many hunters plant wheat for deer food plots and managing wheat in the manner described can complement the deer management program and provide additional recreation in the form of dove hunting.

Freshly planted wheat fields will sometimes attract doves. If you choose to hunt over the freshly planted field, it is important that the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service planting guidelines be followed. Otherwise dove hunting over a freshly planted wheat field may be considered hunting over bait. Additionally, there are some other issues relating to hunting over bait that may affect you, so to avoid running afoul of the baiting regulations, we recommend that hunters stay away from hunting doves over freshly planted fields. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a website (www.fws.gov) with more specific information relative to baiting issues.

Native Vegetation

Natural vegetation such as goatweed, crabgrass, barnyard grass, and bird-eye should not be overlooked and these native plants can be managed to create excellent dove fields. The fields should be cut and manipulated in the same manner as planted fields. Haying or mowing and burning works best on grass fields, while mowing alone can be effective in goatweed fields. Sometimes goatweed grows in sparse sands, so mowing is not always necessary.



